

John 21:1-19

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

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The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take

you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

How many of you have ever been on a trust walk—where you're blindfolded, and you have to let somebody else lead you around? They're a lot more fun to watch than they are to do, because you get to see people who are normally striding ahead full throttle suddenly faltering—going slowly, their arms out in front of them, their balance a little off, putting one tentative foot out in front of the other.

I always think about that with our passage from Acts, in which Saul is storming off toward Damascus, full of certainty and purpose, to destroy anyone from The Way that he finds there. The Way, of course, was the term they used for following Jesus. And Saul, being a good Pharisee, knows for sure that The Way is an abomination to God that has to be obliterated.

So Saul is on *his* way, charging off full tilt to destroy *The Way*, when all of a sudden Jesus appears to him in a light from heaven so powerful that Saul is blinded and he falls to the ground. He calls out, "Who are you, Lord?" And he hears a voice say, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." So Saul gets up, but he can't see anything, so the people with him have to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus, where he is tutored in The Way, his name is changed to Paul, and he becomes one of Jesus' most ardent followers.

Saul had to become blind in order to have his eyes opened. And he had to let someone else lead him in order to find out where he was to go.

I really like that this story is paired with the passage from John that ends up with Jesus telling Simon Peter, "when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." This sounds like bad news, especially since we're told that Jesus says this to let Peter know the kind of death he will have. But I think it's also about the kind of *life* he will have, if he's wise. Because, like Saul, Simon Peter is at his worst when he tries to be in charge of his own life.

We see it in this passage. It takes place right after the risen Lord has appeared to the disciples, but now, he has left again. The disciples are at a loss as to what to do next, so Simon Peter jumps up and says, "I'm going to go fishing."

Now, this is a bad idea. It's a bad idea, because the fact of the matter is, Simon Peter is a lousy fisherman. Anytime we see him in charge of a fishing expedition, he comes up empty. The first time we meet him in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he's dragging in an empty boat after a long night of nothing. And here, in John's Gospel, he and his friends go out in a boat—again, all night long-- and by morning they've got exactly zilch to show for it. My guess is, the day Simon Peter dropped his nets and went off with Jesus, his whole family heaved a sigh of relief that maybe he'd finally found something he was good at. Now, though, with Jesus apparently out of the picture, he decides to go back to his old, pathetic ways.

Fortunately, Jesus shows up on the shore, and just like the first time he met Simon Peter in the other Gospels, this makes all the difference. In the other Gospels, he told him to go out into the deep water, and Peter hauled in so many fish that they nearly sank the boat. Here, Jesus calls to him: "Throw your nets on the right side of the boat." Simon Peter does, and the nets come back so full that all the disciples together can hardly haul them.

Take your boat to the *deep* water. Throw your nets on the *right* side of the boat. Go into Damascus, blind, and you will be told what you are to do.

I wish discipleship were more straightforward. For that matter, I wish *life* were more straightforward. I wish we could see the end of the path when we first set out on our way. But that's just not the way it works. That's not the way it works in our individual journeys—how many of us have lives that look the way we expected when we were younger? And it's not the way it works on our journey together as the church. We end up groping forward, blindly, feeling along the wall until we find a door that opens—and when we step through it, we may find ourselves someplace we would never have imagined.

For several years, I served a church in Mason City, Iowa. Iowa is a state where most of the young people leave, and where the fastest growing age group is people over 100. So the church was in a state with an aging population, and in a small city surrounded by corn and soybean fields. You know what ended up becoming the two defining programs of that congregation? Youth ministry and ministry to LGBTQ folks. In a small city in north central Iowa. I didn't expect that. In each case—with youth, with LGBTQ-- it was just a matter of responding to one small, seemingly isolated need, but then every time we'd take one step in that direction, another door would open, and then another.

My next church was in Marin County, California—one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. That church ended up focusing on homelessness. We didn't expect that—it's just what emerged.

Here, you already know what your focuses are, from the Going Forward Plan: Racial Reconciliation, Economic Justice, Educational Equity, and Homelessness. That's a pretty long list, but they intersect so much that if we work hard on one or two of them, we will impact *all* of them. What we don't know is where those issues will take us. Here's what I do know, though, from my own experience: if we keep doing what we can, learning what we can, talking to everyone we can, and praying whenever we can, doors will swing open. Doors into surprising, new possibilities. Doors into new relationships. Doors into new visibility in our community and in the city.

I heard a phrase on the radio this morning that really struck me: “short steps, long vision.” The steps are ours, as we move within whatever direction we feel God is calling us. But the vision is God's.

So, back to Simon Peter. He hauls in the net, then Jesus fixes them breakfast (fish, the breakfast of champions), and turns to Simon Peter. "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you," so Jesus says, "Then feed my lambs."

Jesus asks again, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you," so Jesus says, "Then tend my sheep."

He asks third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter feels hurt because Jesus asked a third time, so he answers, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." And Jesus says to him, "Feed my sheep."

This exchange is Jesus' way of undoing the damage from the last time Peter tried to take charge of his own life—the time during Jesus' trial, when he tried to protect himself by denying three times that he even knew Jesus. Now, Jesus has him affirm three times that he loves him. That he belongs to him.

But beyond undoing the past, it's also Jesus' way of setting the course for the future. “Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.”

Simon Peter isn't told exactly what this will look like. As we follow his story further, we'll see that he constantly needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit to find

his way. Like him, we, too, may find ourselves over and over putting out our hands and needing to be led.

But at least we can use Jesus' commands to gauge whether we are going in the right direction. "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep." Is whatever we're doing addressing a deep hunger in our community? Is it feeding people—whether in body or in spirit? Is it increasing the strength and health of the larger community? Is it creating and nurturing relationships?

If we can answer 'yes' to those questions, then we'll know that what's tugging us along is the Holy Spirit; and that the voice we hear giving us directions belongs to the risen Lord.

So long as that's the case, it doesn't matter that we can't see the end of the path. After all, the one who is guiding us will always know the way.